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ABSTRACT

The concept of active learning is analyzed in terms of its place in the democratic school. Defined is the meaning of an effective democracy and active learning. The relationship of participation to democracy is analyzed in terms of effectiveness. Ownership and empowerment are the keys to participatory democracy. Several educators' philosophies are examined: Maria Montessori, Benjamin Bloom, and J. Goodlad. Student preparation for a democractic society is one purpose for the active learning project. Appended are 14 references. (SI)

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Active Learning: Positive Impact For Schools and Democratic Society

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Active Learning: Positive Impact For Schools and Democratic Society

Effective democracy is defined as opportunity of participation. Democracy involves equal opportunity for all citizenry. Education in a democratic society should be of a participatory nature and should provide individuals with the proper access to suitable information. Suitable information gives citizenry the power to live effectively in a democracy. Participatory education in a democracy links student involvement with the access of knowledge.

Active learning denotes participation in the learning process. It helps guarantee the proper access of knowledge by exposing the learner to various active learning techniques. This type of school reform was proposed by John Dewey (1938) when he asked these questions:

> How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them? How many acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their

power of judgement and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited?

Dewey (1916) contends that a society is only democratic if it provides participation on equal terms for all members. Schools are a microcosm of society. The basics of citizenship are explored in schools and need to reflect this participatory nature.

Democracy needs to reflect participation in schools which leads to participation as an adult. The fear of democracy collapsing because of a failure of participation has historical foundations. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) point out that Thomas Jefferson believed that democracy could only be effective in a society where citizens actually participate. Bellah et al.(1985) state that other spectators of American democracy have expressed similar fears. Among other spectators was Alexis de Tocqueville who had visited the United States in the 1830s with a particular concern in how citizens operate within a democracy. Lack of participation, de Tocqueville feared, would lead to a type of isolationism that could foster despotism. de

Tocqueville postulated that the cure for this perceived ill was active citizen involvement or "associational life" that would develop the habits of public responsibility and public iniative.

Active learning is education in the democratic participatory mode. The ability to analyze and ask questions are by-products of this learning. The purpose of an active learning project is to perpetuate and encourage participatory democracy by operating the school in this fashion. As adults, democratic citizenry cannot be expected to function properly in a democracy when as children and youth they have been involved in an educational system that is not founded on such democratic ideals as students having active involvement and ownership in the learning process. Students can have a voice in this process.

Ownership and empowerment are the keys to participatory democracy. Empowerment is the foundation of the democratic school. It is the voice of the student being actively involved in their environment. Students receive empowerment through active learning.Teachers need empowerment

for their active voice and sense of ownership. Teacher empowerment could be the cure for some of our educational ills. Theodore Sizer's (1985) recent study of American schools points out that teachers have answers for student achievement and self-esteem, yet lack the power and ownership that would lead to reform.

As evidence of this reform schools should reflect the democratic community in a minicommunity sense. Benjamin Barber (1984) defines participation and community as aspects of one single social mode: citizenship. He goes on to further make a case for participation and ownership by stating:

> **Participation, after all, enhances the power of communities and endows them with a moral force that nonparticipatory rulership rarely achieves.**

Dewey (1900) formulated his "learning by doing" theory at the turn of this century. He compared his child centered concepts to the Copernicun theory by comparing the child to the sun and the center of the solar system.

In more recent history,treating the child as as individual was a popular notion. Maria Montessori (Rambusch,1962) understood the need for the child to be the active agent of his/her learning. The central theme of Montessori's philosophy was the child's feeling of ownership, empowerment, and personal investment.

Another Montessori concept important for the democratic school, "Learning how to learn" (Rambusch, 1962) gives the learner the proper disposition, skills and attention necessary to be a life-long learner.

Some noted educators have joined the "learning how to learn" camp. Among these is Benjamin Bloom (1981) who believes that when the child "learns how to learn" that he/she can be notably motivated by finding pleasure in learning. Students are able to develop skills in providing feedback for themselves. Active learning can teach skills for obtaining answers. Knowing how to get answers from friends, books, and teachers is one of the keys to school and life success.There is always more than one "teacher" in every classroom and during every experience.

Research does support the efficacy of active learning, but tends to give many of America's public schools mixed reviews on exactly how much active learning is taking place. Goodlad's (1984) recent exhaustive study on the state of affairs of education supports the image of teachers spending much of their time in the passive learning practices of lecturing and explaining. Goodlad reports that in a majority of the more than one thousand schools studied, written work dominated the lower grades while lecturing was used as the dominant mode in junior and senior high. Goodlad's research also indicated that student preference for specific subjects showed that interest was higher in those subjects that exhibited active learning characteristics as movement, peer interaction, and personal involvement.

At the same time, Goodlad (1984) is optimistic that teachers can alternate teaching methods through self-initiation, self-assessment, and self-improvement as teachers can model and provide the proper access of knowledge for students. After studying today's schools, Goodlad

expresses concern as to " whether or not we are willing to spend time and resources in moving from diagnosis to remediation."

If remediation is accomplished, Goodlad proposes a view of what schools could be when he states:

> **Children should create their own economies, based on sound economic principles; create their own plays, with due attention to the structure of drama; conduct mock courts, legislative sessions, and world peace organizations. In the process, they read, write, compute, and deal with the problems of people, their environment, and the relationships among them.**

A prime example of this type of learning is Eliot Wigginton's (1985) "Foxfire" experience; where Wigginton, as a high school teacher in northern Georgia, put together a newspaper and seven books based on the skills and experiences of the people of Appalachia. Wigginton expostlates "meaningful experience" where students successfully use the information that they have acquired. He paraphrases John Dewey when he asserts that "you don't learn the basics by memorizing the basics, but by doing projects (or creating projects) where the basics have to be utilized."

Linda McNeil (1988) reported on schools that do and do not use a successful combination of active and passive learning. She defines the improper access of knowledge as "defensive teaching." The qualities of "defensive teaching" are enumerated further as strategies of fragmentation, mystification, and omission. These strategies, which may be more system than teacher inflicted, generally denote a practice of skipping over material and providing little time for the students to analyze material that they have studied.

On the positive side, McNeil (1988), reports about magnet schools that provide the proper access of knowledge. The multisensory approach advocated by these magnet schools has been validated by studies like the Socony-Mobil (Lall,1983). These authors report higher retention of knowledge for those students exposed to this kind of teaching. McNeil goes on to clarify the plan of these schools when she explains:

> Their students spent hours riding buses and more hours reading literature, composing poetry, entering engineering design contests, discovering public

and university libraries, and even asking questions in class.

As Aunt Addie Norton, from Wigginton's Foxfire experience states:

> I tell you one thing, if you learn it by yourself, if you have to get down and dig for it, it never leaves you. It stays there as long as you live because you had to dig it outof the mud before you learned what it was.

I have defined active learning and it's place in the democratic school. Without active learning, school is a place where democracy is practiced in name only. Students are not properly prepared for participation in a democratic society. A democracy needs students who have been trained in the active learning principles of analyzing and questioning and who have received the proper access of knowledge.

Student preparation for a democratic society is one purpose for the active learning project. Teachers believe in active learning, but need support to accomplish their goals. The research and self-assessment devices in the project provide immediate support. These devices also give confirmation that the administration believes in active learning. Hopefully this will lead to

central office and monetery support for future active learning projects.

As instructional leader of my school, I have determined that another important reason for presenting my project to the staff was to nudge them into a closer look at their practices. Underlying this plan is my own view that most teachers believe active learning is desirable, whether they practice it or not.

The final reason for my project presentation to the staff provides a dose of optimism for the future. All this talk about empowerment, ownership, and participation means nothing unless it is an across- the- board virus that infects everyone in the school. Giving students ownership and power through active learning means nothing if staff members lack proper feelings of ownership and power themselves. From this report alone, I have visions of teachers being involved in agenda setting for setting staff meetings which will transform these meetings from announcements of a meaningless nature to useful in-service with teacher ownership.

Democracy needs active participation. Democratic schools need this participation learning in order to ensure the proper access of knowledge. Participation by all members of the school community validates the ownership that keeps the spirit of democracy alive.

The spirit of democracy was fashioned by Barber (1985) when he said:

> There is one road to freedom:it lies through democracy. The last best hope now, as two hundred years ago, is that America can be America: truly self-governing and democratic, thus free.

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